DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 195 611 UD 020 994

TITLE Initial Black Pulse Findings, Bulletin No. 1.
INSTITUTION National Urban League, Inc., Washington, D.C. Research Dept.
SPONS AGENCY Carnegie Corp. of New York, N.Y.
PUB DATE Aug 80
NOTE 9p.: Not available in paper copy due to institution's restriction. For a related document see UD 020 995.

EDRS PRICE MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS *Black Attitudes: *Black Community: *Community Problems: *Economic Climate: Family (Sociological Unit): Inflation (Economics): National Surveys: Racial Discrimination: Suspension: Unemployment

ABSTRACT

In 1979, the National Urban League and its local affiliates launched the Black Pulse, a nationwide survey designed to (1) assess the needs and status of blacks in such areas as employment, housing, child care, education, health, crime, political participation, family patterns, and discrimination; and (2) determine the extent to which major governmental policies, programs, and services were meeting their needs. In this report some preliminary findings from the survey are provided. Highlights include: (1) blacks consider unemployment to be the most serious problem in the black community: (2) inflation is also having a strong impact on the economic condition of blacks: (3) joblessness among black heads of household is three times greater than the national average: (4) the vast majority of blacks of all income levels feel that racial discrimination continues to be widespread and that the push for equal rights is too slow: (5) school suspensions are much more pervasive among blacks than is commonly believed: (6) the maintenance of strong kinship ties is important in the black community: and (7) contrary to popular belief, the overwhelming majority of blacks feel that black people should cooperate with the 1980 Census. (Author/GC)

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Research Department

BLACK PULSE

Bulletin No. 1 August, 1980

Initial Black Pulse Findings

Highlights

- Unemployment is unequivocally the number one problem in the black community, with inflation ranking a distant third. Three times as many blacks feel that joblessness (34%) rather than inflation (11%) is the most serious problem.
- Nevertheless, blacks acknowledge that inflation is also having a devastating impact on their economic condition. Two-thirds (68%) of all black household heads said that their incomes had "fallen behind" the rising cost of living over the past two years. In addition, almost half (44%) of all blacks said they were "worse off" financially today than they were a year ago.
- Contrary to the popular belief that the black unemployment crisis is primarily among black youth, joblessness among black heads of household was at depression levels even before the current recession! The actual unemployment rate for black household heads during the last quarter of 1979 was 24%—three times the U. S. Labor Department jobless rate (8%).
- The overwhelming majority of blacks today, regardless of economic status, feel that racial discrimination continues to be widespread. About 70% of blacks with incomes of $20,000 or more feel there is "a great deal" of discrimination against blacks today, compared to 61% of blacks with incomes under $6,000.
- Most blacks are getting increasingly impatient with what they feel is an eroding commitment toward racial equality. Three-fourths (75%) of all black heads of household feel that the push for equal rights for blacks today is "too slow." Ten years ago, a Louis Harris survey revealed that only 47% of all blacks felt that the push for racial equality was moving "too slow."
- School suspensions are much more pervasive among blacks than is commonly believed. One-fourth (24%) of black parents with school-age children reported that at least one of their children had been suspended from school.
- Maintaining strong kinship ties continues to be of significance in the black community. About half (46%) of all black families have regular family reunions.
- Contrary to popular belief, the overwhelming majority (90%) of blacks across this nation feel that black people should cooperate with the 1980 Census.

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This report and the Black Pulse Survey were supported through funds provided by the Carnegie Corporation and the extensive in-kind contributions of UL affiliates across the nation. But the views expressed in this report are solely the responsibility of the NUL Research Department.

Introduction

In 1979, the National Urban League and its local affiliates launched the Black Pulse, a nationwide survey designed to: (a) assess the needs and status of blacks in such areas as employment, housing, child care, education, health, crime, political participation, family patterns and discrimination and (b) determine the extent to which major governmental policies, programs and services were meeting their needs. Using volunteers and staff primarily from Urban League affiliates as well as from colleges and other community groups, door-to-door interviews were systematically and randomly conducted with about 3,000 black heads of households in central cities, suburbs and rural areas between October 1979 and January 1980.[1]

Since most national surveys of blacks usually have samples about half (about 1,300) as large as the Black Pulse, this is one of the largest nationwide surveys of blacks conducted in the U.S.[2] And it clearly is the most comprehensive survey of the needs and social and economic conditions of black people ever conducted by the black community itself. In this initial report, we will provide an overview of some preliminary findings from the NUL Black Pulse Survey.

Most Important Problem—Unemployment or Inflation?

In recent years there has been widespread debate as to which is the more important problem in the U.S. today—inflation or unemployment? According to most national surveys, whites consider inflation to be a much more pressing problem than unemployment.[3] But the Black Pulse Survey reveals that joblessness is unequivocally considered to be the number one problem in the black community today, with inflation ranking a distant third. One-third (34%) of all black household heads consider unemployment to be "the most important problem facing black people in the U.S. today," compared to only one-tenth (11%) of blacks who felt that the high cost of living was the most pressing problem for blacks. In other words, three times as many blacks felt that joblessness rather than inflation was the most serious problem for blacks today.

Interestingly, contrary to patterns among whites, "middle-income" blacks are just as likely as "low-income" blacks to consider unemployment to be the number one problem for blacks today and inflation to be the third most important problem.[4] While 33 percent of blacks with household incomes under $6,000 considered joblessness to be the most serious problem for blacks, 38 percent of blacks with incomes of $20,000 or more also ranked unemployment as the dominant concern for blacks. On the other hand, only one-tenth of all low-income blacks (11%) and all middle-income blacks (11%) felt that the high cost of living was the most pressing problems for blacks today.

However, because unemployment is considered to be a more serious problem by blacks than inflation, it is erroneous to infer that blacks do not feel that inflation is having a devastating impact on their economic condition. On the contrary, according to the Black Pulse Survey, two-thirds (68%) of all black household heads said their incomes had "fallen behind" the rising cost of living over the past two years. In addition, almost half (44%) of the respondents said they were "worse off financially today (than) . . . a year ago."

The overwhelming majority of both low-income and middle-income blacks indicate that their household incomes have not kept up with inflation. Almost three-fourths (73%) of blacks with incomes under $6,000 report that their incomes have fallen behind the cost of living, compared to 60% of blacks with incomes of $20,000 or more. At the same time, about half (51%) of low-income blacks feel that they are financially worse off today than they were a year ago, compared to 31% of middle-income blacks. But only 24% of middle-income blacks said they were better off financially today, compared to 15% of low-income blacks. Thus, a higher proportion of middle-income (and low-income) blacks feel that they are financially worse off today than feel they are better off.

The Continuing Significance of Racism

Another controversial issue is the extent to which there has been a significant decline in racism as a key determinant of the economic status of blacks. The most widespread method used to make such a determination has been to conduct comparative analyses of the social and economic status of blacks based on such "objective" measures as occupational position, educational attainment and income level. Researchers have reached opposite conclusions using such an approach depending on whether (and how) they compare blacks to themselves or whether (and how) they compare blacks to whites at the same point in time.[5]

A less frequent approach that is employed to ascertain the significance of racism in the lives of blacks is to ask them directly. Most national surveys have traditionally asked whites about their perception of the extent of racial discrimination. Consequently, it has often been inferred that discrimination has significantly declined because of the large drop in the proportion of whites perceiving it.

However, when blacks are asked directly about the significance of racism, one finds that it continues to be one of the most over-riding concerns of blacks today. In fact, discrimination ranks as the second most important problem for blacks today—regardless of their economic status. According to the Black Pulse Survey, 16% of all black household heads consider discrimination to be the most important problem facing blacks today. And, once again, blacks who are middle-income (15%) are just as likely as those who are low-income (14%) to place racism as the second most serious problem for blacks.

Moreover, the overwhelming majority of blacks feel that black people are being discriminated against extensively today. About 64% of all respondents feel that black people are being discriminated against "a great deal" in the U.S. today. And, surprisingly, middle-income blacks are *more* likely than low-income blacks to feel that discrimination is widespread in this nation. For, 70% of blacks with incomes of $20,000 or more feel there is "a great deal" of discrimination against blacks today,compared to 61% of blacks with incomes under $6,000.

Thus, if there has been a significant decline in racism in recent years, middle-income blacks appear to be less aware of it than low-income backs. In later Black Pulse reports, we will more closely examine the extent to which both low-income and middle-income blacks report experiencing discrimination themselves in such areas as jobs, housing, loans, public accommodations and contacts with public and private agencies and officials.

Rising Black Rage?

The Black Pulse Survey reveals that, in addition to perceiving widespread racism in the U.S., blacks are getting increasingly impatient with what they feel is an eroding commitment toward equality. In order to assess the degree of black satisfaction or impatience with the current push for racial equality, respondents were asked, "Is the push for equal rights for black people in this country moving too fast, at about the right pace or too slow?" Seventy-five percent of all black household heads felt that it was "too slow," 20% said it was "about right," while only 5% felt it was moving "too fast."

The fact that the overwhelming majority of blacks today feel that the push for racial equality is too slow is a dramatic increase from the proportion of blacks who felt that way at the beginning of this decade. In a 1970 Louis Harris national

survey commissioned by the National Urban League, black respondents were asked a similar question, "Is the push for racial equality in this country moving too fast, at about the right pace or too slow?" About half (47%) of all blacks felt it was moving "too slow," 41% said it was "about right," while 12% felt it was "too fast." Thus, as a result of the momentum of the civil rights movement of the 1960's, a majority (53%) of blacks were relatively satisfied with the push for racial equality by the end of that decade. But this "satisfied" majority decreased by one-half during the 1970's, so that today only one-fourth of all blacks feel that the push for racial equality is "about right" (20%) or "too fast" (5%).

Interestingly, it is the middle-income blacks—the group that is supposed to have made the most significant progress during the '70's—who are *most* dissatisfied with the pace of the push for racial equality today. While 72% of blacks with incomes under $6,000 feel that it is moving "too slow," 83% of blacks with incomes of $20,000 or more are similarly dissatisfied, according to the Black Pulse Survey. Only about one-fourth of low-income blacks feel that the push for equal rights for blacks is moving "about right" (22%) or "too fast" (6%), while less than one-fifth of middle-income blacks feel that it is moving "about right" (15%) or "too fast" (2%).

In sum, these findings reveal that the overwhelming majority of blacks today—regardless of economic status—feel that racial discrimination is widespread and that the push for racial equality is significantly lagging. Thus, the ingredients for such eruptions as the devastating racial disorders in Miami in May, 1980, may exist in many other black communities across this nation.

Other Areas of Concern

Clearly, unemployment, discrimination and inflation were the top three concerns of blacks in response to the open-ended question, "What do you think is the *most* important problem facing black people in the United States today?" But there were many other issues that blacks felt were significant to them. About one-tenth (9%) of the black respondents cited "inadequate income" as the most important problem for blacks. Obviously, many of the blacks who felt that unemployment and inflation were severe problems for blacks also felt that blacks suffered from a lack of adequate income, but their volunteered responses gave greater emphasis to dimensions more closely related to joblessness and the high cost of living. On the other hand, those who felt inadequate income was the major problem for blacks volunteered responses emphasizing the poverty conditions and low wages prevalent among blacks.

Respondents in the Black Pulse Survey also expressed concern about problems relating to education, housing, crime, child care, family patterns, police relations and other areas. In later Black Pulse reports we will examine many of these concerns in great detail. However, we will now attempt to briefly illustrate how a systematic assessment of the experiences and conditions of blacks throughout this nation can have important implications for improving many key social policies, e.g. concerning such controversial issues as the measurement of unemployment, school suspensions, foster care and the census undercount.

How Extensive is Black Unemployment?

Why should unemployment be the dominant concern of blacks? Since the overwhelming majority of black household heads are employed, why should they feel that unemployment is the paramount issue for blacks? The Black Pulse Survey reveals that the primary reason that unemployment is a central concern for most blacks is because joblessness is much more pervasive throughout the black community than governmental statistics indicate.

Using the U.S. Labor Department's method of classifying individuals as "employed" (i.e., currently working) and "unemployed" (i.e., looking for work), the Black Pulse Survey yielded an unemployment rate of 20% for all blacks 16 years and over. This is about double the Labor Department's published jobless rate of 11% for blacks during the fourth quarter of 1979, when most of the Black Pulse interviews were conducted. It should be clearly understood, however, that the 20% unemployed rate for blacks in the Black Pulse Survey does not even include "discouraged workers" (i.e., those who want work, but are not actively looking for it).

But the Black Pulse Survey also revealed that unemployment among black heads of household was also twice as high as government unemployment rates. While the Labor Department indicated that the unemployment rate for black household heads in the fourth quarter of 1979 was 8 percent, the Black Pulse Survey revealed that their jobless rate was 15 percent—even when discouraged workers were excluded.

One possible explanation for this discrepancy in the jobless rates for black houshold heads is that while the government's survey, the Current Population Survey (or CPS), accepts the responses of *any* person 14 years and over regarding the employment status of all other members of that household, the Black Pulse Survey asked *only* heads of households (i.e., either a husband or a wife or an unmarried head) about their own, their spouse's and other household members' employment status. Household heads were used as the only respondents in the Black Pulse Survey partly in response to criticism of the Current Population Survey's use of any adult as a proxy or respondent for other household members—increasingly by telephone. We made the assumption that household heads would be able to provide more accurate information about their employment status than any other member of that household if they were contacted directly *and* in person. This assumption is strongly reinforced by recent findings from a large-scale continuing study of youth (i.e., the National Longitudinal Survey) conducted by Ohio State University's Center for Human Resources Research for the U.S. Labor Department, which also used direct interview techniques.

By conducting comprehensive personal interviews with youth about their own employment status in early 1979, the Ohio State researchers obtained unemployment rates for young people in general that were about 62% higher than their jobless rates according to the Labor Department's Current Population Survey. Most significantly, these researchers estimated that governmental statistics understate the unemployment rate for black and female youth by 100%![6] In other words, like the Black Pulse, the Ohio State survey also obtained unemployment figures for blacks that were twice as high as government figures. The findings from these two surveys lend strong support to the concern expressed by the President's National Commission on Employment and Unemployment Statistics regarding the extent of inaccuracy in labor force statistics that may be due to increasing use of telephone rather than personal interviews and proxy rather than self-respondents in the government's Current Population Surveys.[7]

But the use of substitute respondents and telephones are not the only sources of error in governmental labor force figures. A major deficiency in official unemployment data is the failure to incorporate the "discouraged workers"—those persons who want work, but are discouraged from actively seeking it. Past studies using the NUL Hidden Unemployment Index have consistently found that the actual unemployment rate among blacks is significantly understated in Labor Department figures because of the exclusion of discouraged workers.[8] Moreover, the President's unemployment panel also strongly urged the Labor Department to place high priority on determining the feasibility of incorporating discouraged workers into future unemployment figures.

Consequently, the Black Pulse Survey included questions that facilitated gauging the extent of "hidden unemployment" among black heads of households. By adding discouraged

workers (i.e., those who want work, but are not currently looking for it) to the "official" unemployed (i.e. those who are looking for work), the actual unemployment rate for black household heads soared from 15% to 24%—three times the Labor Department jobless rate of 8% for them during the last quarter of 1979. Because of the onset of a new recession during the first half of 1980, the actual levels of joblessness among black household heads today are even higher than those revealed in the Black Pulse Survey which was conducted largely during the fourth quarter of 1979.

Thus, contrary to the popular belief that the black unemployment crisis is primarily concentrated among black youth, our nationwide survey indicates that the actual extent of joblessness among black heads of households was already at depression levels prior to the current recession.

Yet unemployment is not only a severe problem for black household heads who want work, but it has also plagued sizable numbers of those who are currently working. About one-fifth (18%) of all currently-employed black household heads were out of work at some time during 1979—many of them for extended periods.

With one-fourth of all black household heads unable to obtain work and one-fifth of those currently working having been unemployed for extended periods of time, it should now be quite clear why unemployment was the dominant concern in the black community—even before the 1980 recession. Moreover, these findings refer only to joblessness among black household heads and do not reveal the pervasiveness of unemployment among other members of black households—who usually have much higher levels of joblessness. Thus, even black households in which both heads are employed are often affected by unemployment because of the high jobless rates among other household members. In subsequent Black Pulse reports, we will examine in detail the extent of joblessness among other household members, most especially black youth.

In sum, these findings reveal that, prior to the 1980 recession, unemployment among black heads of household was already at depression levels. When discouraged workers are excluded, the unemployment rate for black household heads was 15%. But when the hidden unemployed are included, the actual jobless rate for black household heads soared to 24%—three times the Labor Department rate. Furthermore, one-fifth of the black household heads who are currently working were unemployed at some time during 1979.

School Suspensions—Isolated or Widespread?

Another volatile issue in the black community today is the extent to which black children are being unfairly suspended and expelled from schools. While many blacks contend that such "push out" practices are widespread, many school officials respond that disproportionate suspensions of black children are isolated or concentrated in only a selected number of school systems.

But, the Black Pulse Survey reveals that such experiences with school systems are much more pervasive among blacks than is commonly believed. In fact, about one out of every four (24%) black parents with school-age children reported that at least one of their children had been suspended from school. As one might expect, low-income parents were more likely than middle-income parents to have had their children suspended. Yet, although 29% of black parents with incomes under $6,000 said their children had been suspended, a surprisingly large proportion (18%) of parents with incomes of $20,000 or more also had children who had been suspended. Such relatively high rates of suspension in black families raise serious questions about the racial equity of school suspension practices across this nation.

As might be expected, the proportion of black children expelled from schools is much lower than the proportion suspended. But the fact that almost one out of every ten (7%) black parents with school-age children throughout this country had at least one of their children expelled from school is still cause for great concern.

Placement of Children With Non-Relatives

But not only are black children being disproportionately suspended from schools, they are also being disproportionately removed from their homes. Historically, blacks have been concerned about the under-utilization of relatives by agencies in providing services to children and families. Such insensitive social policies are most evident in the area of foster care and adoption, where much greater priority is given to non-relatives over relatives in the placement of children.

Many social service agencies contend that such practices exist because no relatives can usually be found to provide foster care or adoption services to black children. In order to determine the extent to which black families were indeed isolated from relatives, the Black Pulse Survey asked, "Do you (or your spouse) have any relatives who live in this city, but not in this household?" Eighty-five % of all black household heads reported relatives living in their same city—but not in their immediate households.

Thus, the overwhelming majority of black families today are not isolated from relatives. And if this nation is genuinely concerned about building on the strengths of *all* families in America, social policies should be modified to give greater priority to utilizing relatives in providing vital services and support to black children and their families.

Another indicator of the strong bonds among kin in black families today is the continuing significance of family reunions. Since the prevalence of this phenomenon among blacks (or whites, for that matter) had never before been gauged in any national survey, the Black Pulse Survey asked its respondents, "Does your (or your spouse's) family have planned family reunions other than gatherings for weddings, graduations and funerals?"

About half (46%) of all black households indicated that their families did hold periodic family reunions. Interestingly, middle-income blacks were more likely to have family reunions than low-income blacks. 63 percent of black households with incomes of $20,000 or more held family reunions, compared to 38% of blacks with incomes under $6,000. This is probably partly due to the fact that it is becoming increasingly expensive for many extended black families to hold regular family reunions. Subsequent Black Pulse reports will examine in depth the role of extended families among both low-income and middle-income blacks today.

The Census Undercount

Another important concern in the black community, especially during this year of the 1980 Census, is the historic undercount of blacks in decennial censuses. The Census Bureau estimated that a total of 5.3 million persons were missed in the 1970 Census—2 million of whom were black. Or, while 2% of whites were left out, the Bureau reported that about 8% of the black population were omitted. This disproportionate undercount of blacks represents the denial of equitable political representation of blacks in Congress as well as in state and local legislative bodies. In addition, it represents the loss of incalculable billions of dollars in potential federal (and state) per capita aid in such vital areas as employment, housing, economic development, transportation, education, social services and revenue-sharing to cities with sizable black populations.

A continuing controversy around this issue is the extent to which the black undercount is primarily due to widespread hostility of blacks toward the census or to significant deficiencies in Census Bureau enumeration techniques and procedures

in black communities. Unfortunately, since no national survey had ever inquired about the attitudes of blacks toward the Census, it had not been possible to systematically test the validity of these opposing viewpoints.

However, the Black Pulse Survey did ask all of its respondents the following question, "Do you think that black people should cooperate with the 1980 Census by completing and returning the census forms that are sent to them? Contrary to popular belief, 90% of all black respondents felt that blacks *should* cooperate with the 1980 Census, only 4% felt they should not cooperate, while 6% said they did not know. The overwhelmingly favorable attitude of blacks toward the Census clearly indicates that, if as many blacks are left out of the 1980 Census as were missed in 1970, this disproportionate undercount cannot be attributed to widespread opposition in the black community. Census Bureau procedures will have to be significantly revamped, in accordance with recommendations of its minority advisory committees, in order to obtain a much more accurate count of minorities in future censuses.

Methodology

The Black Pulse is a nationwide needs assessment survey of blacks directed by the National Urban League and its local affiliates. As such, it primarily focuses on the social and economic needs and conditions of blacks rather than on their opinions concerning national issues.

A planning grant from the Ford Foundation facilitated the initial efforts to launch the Black Pulse in early 1979 and an implementation grant from Carnegie Corporation insured the successful execution of those plans in the field in the fall and winter of 1979. Mathematica Policy Research, a well-respected survey research firm based in Princeton, New Jersey, was retained to provide expertise in such vital areas as: (a) drawing a nationally representative sample of blacks; (b) training national, regional and local field staff; (c) supervising the field efforts across the nation and (d) processing the data for analysis by NUL staff.

The Black Pulse Survey used a systematic stratified sample of the black population in the U.S. The strata consisted of the following three types of localities: central cities, suburbs, and rural/non-metropolitan areas. The central city stratum was over-sampled, while the rural/non-metropolitan stratum was under-sampled. The selection of individual census tracts and blocks for the sample used a multi-stage, random procedure based upon their black populations according to the 1970 Census. After blocks were initially selected, the sample was updated for each block using visual estimation techniques to verify the extent to which 1970 black population patterns were still relevant in 1979. When the 1970 Census figures varied significantly from the visual estimation of the population, the sample size for that block was changed to reflect the more recent data on the black population.

In order to enhance the quality and generalizability of the data collected, several constraints were instituted in the sample design. Contrary to the practice in most national surveys, it was decided that *only* heads of households (i.e., a husband or a wife or an unmarried adult head) would be eligible to be respondents in the Black Pulse Survey. Secondly, there was to be no substitution or replacement for households that refused to cooperate, or in which the heads were not available after repeated callbacks. And, third, all interviews with the heads of households had to be conducted in person and not by telephone. A further constraint was added to our design which was not desired. It was that no respondent would be paid to be interviewed—since no funds were available for it.

The overwhelming majority of interviewers and local supervisors participating in the Balck Pulse Survey were unpaid volunteers recruited by Urban League affiliates. In addition to volunteers from their own staff, affiliates obtained many volunteers from black colleges, community action agencies and other community-based groups. Volunteers from National Urban League staff in its New York Headquarters, its regional offices and other departments also provided vital assistance to this historic endeavor.

The bulk of the interviewing efforts in the field occurred between October and December 1979. A few localities continued field efforts through February, 1980. About 3,000 interviews with black heads of household were completed during that period of time. Thus, approximately 1,000 interviews were completed a month. Interviews with unmarried heads were usually completed within a half-hour, while interviews with married heads (who were asked comparable information about their spouses) usually took about an hour.

The National Urban League hopes to be able to conduct the Black Pulse Survey on a regular basis. Since the social and economic needs and conditions of blacks are not as quickly susceptible to change as are opinions, it would not be necessary or desirable to conduct a nationwide Black Pulse Survey on an annual basis. However, because of the significance of such data for policy-makers, social action groups and other key decision-makers, the National Urban League is confident that it will acquire adequate financial resources to systematically assess the needs of blacks and the impact of major policies on addressing those needs on a continuing basis as a vital service to this nation.

Footnotes

1. For a detailed description of the survey design and field procedures, see the "methodology" section of this report.

2. Another large-scale national survey, focussing on both the mental health needs of blacks and the conditions of the black elderly is currently being conducted by James Jackson at the University of Michigan's Institute for Social Research

3. Our findings are reinforced by a New York Times/CBS News telephone poll of 1500 adults across the nation between June 18-22, 1980. In responding to the question, "Which do you think is a more important problem facing this country today—unemployment or inflation?, whites were more likely to feel that inflation (50%) was more important then unemployment (29%), while blacks felt that unemployment (51%) was more important than inflation (30%). See *New York Times,* June 27, 1980, p.1

4. For brevity, the term "middle-income" will be used throughout this report to refer to "middle *and* upper-income" blacks with incomes of $20,000 or more. And, "low-income" blacks will refer *only* to blacks with incomes under $6,000

5. Robert B. Hill, *The Illusion of Black Progress,* Washington, D.C.: NUL Research Department, 1978.

6. Judith A. Greene, "Youth Unemployment Worse than Thought But Not Insoluble," *Jobs Watch,* Vol. 1, No. 3, March-April 1980, P. 1-2. A bulletin published by Catholic University's Center for National Policy Review; Also see "U.S. Study Hints at More Jobless in Youth Ranks," *New York Times,* February 29, 1980.

7. U.S. National Commission on Employment and Unemployment Statistics, *Counting the Labor Force,* Washington, D.C., U.S. Government Printing Office, 1979.

8. For a more detailed description of the National Urban League's Hidden Unemployment Index, See *NUL Quarterly Economic Report on the Black Worker,* NUL Research Department, Washington, D.C.

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